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THE CONDITION OF THE AMERICAN STAGE.

DURING the last two or three seasons so few good plays have been brought out in this country that the theatres have been generally unattended by the more intelligent portion of the drama-loving public. As a natural consequence, we hear the cry started by managers, who do not or will not understand the situation, that people who go to the theatre do not want to think, but only to be startled by sensational effects or tickled by grotesque antics. Through gross pandering to morbid tastes, or the desire for mere clowning, managers have, like Frankenstein, created a monster which now pursues and threatens to devour them. The only managers we have who direct stock-theatres, Messrs. Wallack, Daly, and Palmer in New York, and Mr. Field in Boston, have fought bravely, though often unsuccessfully, against the demoralizing tendencies of the mere theatrical speculator, who takes up the drama, or rather some miserable offshoot thereof, for the sole purpose of making money. Now, a manager who is really worthy of the name, must have some feeling for and pride in the art with which he is associated. Unless he has the literary taste to appreciate clever writing, the theatrical training which enables him to choose good and reject bad dramatic "construction," the critical insight necessary to secure able actors and actresses, and to cast them in suitable rôles, and an artistic feeling in the selection of scenery, furniture, and other stage-appointments, he is unfitted for his position, no matter how great his business ability. Every one of the managers named above, possesses these qualities in a high degree; but one or two have become at times so discouraged, as to state in print that they were only business men who kept, so to speak, theatrical shops, and were bound to stock them with just such goods as the public would buy. Admitting for a moment this low view of their calling, it must be conceded by any person who looks beyond the immediate present, that the good man-of-

business who has a reputation to maintain, will not imperil the character of his establishment by offering inferior goods. Messrs. Tiffany could, doubtless, add largely to their profits if they sold flawed or off-colored gems, and Messrs. Steinway or Chickering could immensely increase their sales if they would put their names on cheaply-made and, consequently, low-priced pianos. But these firms, and hundreds of others of similar standing, know that such profits would not be long secured, and that the temporary gain would be far outweighed by the ultimate loss of reputation, and the better-paying and more enduring business dependent thereon. Such firms do not lower the quality of their goods during periods of business depression; on the contrary, they seek to draw trade by making, if possible, their wares more tasteful, novel, and attractive. The theatrical manager, therefore, who, in like times, lowers the quality of the entertainment he provides, is not even a good tradesman, for he is ruining his reputation and driving away future patrons.

The causes which have mainly contributed to bring about the present unsatisfactory condition of the American stage are :

1. General mercantile depression.
2. The lack of particularly good English or French plays.
3. The want of encouragement of American authors.
4. The rise and growth of the acrobatic comedy.
5. The prevalence of the combination system.
6. The fact that management is so largely in the hands of mere speculators.

7. The flooding of the profession by novices from comic opera companies.

(1.) Strikes, labor troubles, the low price of agricultural produce, the dishonest management of railroads, and the nervousness of some capitalists at the transference of political power to the Democracy have combined to cause a stringency in money matters which, naturally, has resulted in a general economizing of expenditures. And the very first expenses which people curtail are those of their amusements. At one time it was contended that in periods of panic and business failure men would go to the theatre to divert their thoughts. Experience and observation have, however, shown this theory to be a fallacy. Nor is it the very rich and fashionable class, who are least affected by the condition of business, that are the best supporters of the theatre.

They have so incessant a round of social amusement that, except when a play is so strong as to become a general topic of conversation, about which it is necessary to know something, they can rarely spare time for the drama. The most constant and liberal theatre-goers are those who may be most accurately defined by the Anglicism, "the upper middle-class." It is precisely these persons, whose incomes are largely dependent on the momentarily existing state of trade or the demand for professional services, who are the first to feel the necessity for economizing.

(2.) Of plays which combined literary excellence with strong dramatic effect both the French and English stages have, during the last three or four years, been singularly barren. "*Fédora*" is almost the only great drama that has come to us from France. Augier, the greatest of all contemporary French dramatists—though unhappily little known to our stage—has been silent; Dumas has produced only one piece, "*Denise*," treating in a rather dull way an extremely unpleasant subject; Feuillet, author of "*Led Astray*" and "*The Romance of a Poor Young Man*," as they are here named, has written only "*Chamillac*," not a very assured success in Paris, and handicapped for this market by the fact that the hero, having been a criminal, is unheroic; Dennery, the *doyen* of French dramatists, has, it is true, constructed another powerful melodrama, "*Martyr*," the American right to which has been secured by Mr. A. M. Palmer, of the Madison Square Theatre, where it will probably be included in the attractions of this season. He produced the play in Chicago, in June last, but the critics of that city were not nearly so enthusiastic concerning it as were those of Paris. The intrigue is based on adultery and the birth of an illegitimate child, subjects with which we have been somewhat surfeited, and from which our healthier moral taste turns with no little abhorrence.

Since the deaths of Robertson and H. J. Byron, England has been without a dramatist of notable force or originality. Wills can treat an old subject poetically, but seems to have no invention; Pinero, though accused of plagiarism in "*The Squire*," has shown in "*The Magistrate*" that he can write a good, bustling light-comedy; perhaps the most earnest and serious writer is H. A. Jones, of "*Silver King*" and "*Saints and Sinners*" fame. The last-mentioned is a good, though by no means a great, play, and was, assuredly, the best English piece that was made known here

last season. There have been many English melodramas reproduced of late in this country, but they are nearly all put together for scenic effect, and do not call for critical attention.

(3.) Not having been able to secure good plays from abroad, have our managers endeavored to give American authors a chance to make their abilities known? Unfortunately only to a very limited extent! A new manageress, Miss Dauvray, did secure a play from Mr. Bronson Howard, and was able to run it an entire season in a theatre previously associated only with failures. This gentleman is certainly the cleverest of American dramatists, and even he finds it desirable to live for the greater part of his time in England, where his pieces are fully appreciated and find ready hearing. In a recent article in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, Mr. Daly pointed to a number of American dramatists who had done good work, and were certainly capable of doing more, but scarcely one of them succeeded in getting a play upon the boards during the season of 1885-6. A man who has a story to tell dramatically will only do his best work when writing for a stock-company, unfettered by the necessity of bringing a "star" or "stars" into prominence to the detriment of the natural development of his plot. Now when there are only in this vast country four permanently-established stock-companies, it is evident that the opportunities for the native dramatist, who aspires to something higher than "star-fitting"—the dramatic tailoring of writing—are very few. One of these four is almost permanently closed against him, for the fortunate manager, Mr. Daly, is able to adapt and arrange his own plays. To his credit, it must be said that he accomplishes his task in a masterly style, and probably no one else could so well fit his company or so thoroughly please his audiences. Then, too, he has settled on a class of light play, which excludes from his stage the writers who deal with the stronger emotions and passions. So the American dramatist's field is narrowed down to three theatres, the managers of which are bidding against each other for established foreign successes, and who, as a rule, will only deal with the native product when their favorite source of supply has temporarily run dry. The extremely uncertain chance of having a play adequately produced is so remote that it deters writers who are able to put their ideas into any other form of literature from attempting to write for the stage. It is absurd to state or suppose that the literary ability

which Americans are constantly displaying, could not be profitably employed on the drama. The technical knowledge necessary can be gained by a close study of plays and the theatre, or may more easily be obtained by taking into collaboration an experienced stage-manager or a hack playwright.

Up to the present time in this country, a dramatist's only source of revenue has been the royalty for the representation of his works, the taste for reading plays not having yet made much progress. In France, a successful play will sell by the tens of thousands, and at a price that yields author and publisher handsome profits. It is a marvelously enticing form of reading, from its necessary terseness, strength, and vivid characterization. A little start has happily been made in this direction in the publication in some of our best magazines of the little reading comedies of Howells, Brander Matthews, Sturgis, and some efforts of my own in the same direction. And I am assured by the editors that stories told in this form are well liked by their readers. The plays of W. S. Gilbert, printed in one volume, have found a fair sale here, and all indications seem to point to the fact that we are slowly, but surely, following the French lead.

(4.) Nearly fifteen years ago, the Vokes family, a number of very clever specialty performers, who had appeared in pantomimes and on the stages of music halls in Great Britain, came to this country and played in a farcical absurdity entitled "Belles of the Kitchen," at the Union Square Theatre. It was an amusing hodge-podge of singing, dancing, pantomime, and burlesque acting. All the performers were able, and none more so than the charming Rosina, who returned to this country last year, and, in a number of short plays, proved that she was still an excellent and most attractive artist. Very soon after the immediate and extremely pronounced success of the Vokes family, a swarm of imitators began to settle on the country. The Troubadours were the first, and then followed such conglomerations as "Fun on The Bristol," "Póp, the Author," etc., etc. These were simply excuses for the introduction on the stages of legitimate theatres of performers and performances which had previously been restricted to the variety stage. Variety theatres were not at that time considered particularly proper places for ladies to go to, and when the new style of entertainment was first opened to them its very novelty, and, perhaps, even the slight suspicion of impropriety that

hung around it, proved attractive. Such alleged plays, which may be termed "acrobatic comedies," appeal only to the eyes, and tickle the ear with "catchy" melodies ; but they never give intellectual gratification, and never arouse any thought, except, perhaps, among those who look on them as a degradation of the drama. Now, a few of these theatrical hashes might not have done any harm, and would have been certainly enough to please the audiences who find it tiresome to follow the thread of a story, or to have their deeper feelings stirred. But, unhappily, the majority of American managers have no distinct policy. When one makes a "hit" with a special style of entertainment, the others all cry out "that is evidently what the public want," and immediately rush off to try and get as close an imitation as possible. The result has been that the country has been literally flooded with acrobatic comedies, each successive one endeavoring to be more outrageously absurd than its predecessor. Last season, what appears to be the climax was reached, in making one of these ollapodridas the medium for putting a circus upon the stage. It was not successful, though the acting people engaged did their best to work up interest for the horses and their riders. It scarcely seems possible that the putters-together of these farce-comedies can extend their field of operations much further. They have tried moving trains, revolving houses, clowns, acrobats, performing animals, and very nude dressing until it seems that their efforts must fail from lack of novelty. Scarcely any actors are employed in these pieces, nearly all the performers being known as "specialty people," whose singing, dancing, or gymnastic accomplishments form nearly their whole claims to notice.

Audiences have become so used to this combination of burlesque with what is technically known as the "knock-down-and-drag-out" business, that they are in the position of a man whose palate has been so long tempted with "kickshaws" that he is unable to enjoy a wholesome diet of plain roast beef. A taste for caviare and *pâté de foie gras*, when once acquired, is not easily shaken off, and the return to healthier food requires a strong effort, and one that may be even a little painful. But the reaction is bound to come, for the most vitiated appetite will, after a while, ask variety in its pleasures.

(5.) The prevalence of the combination system, by which all theatres outside of New York and Boston are furnished with their

entertainments by traveling organizations, has wrought almost incalculable damage to our dramatic art, in every one of its departments. Formerly, when actors and managers of taste and long experience, like McVicker in Chicago, De Bar in St. Louis, Albaugh and Ford in Baltimore, Miles in Cincinnati, Ellsler in Pittsburgh, and others too numerous to mention, controlled the chief theatres of the various States, they kept resident companies, produced new plays, and were, in the true sense of the word, managers. Now they are little more than janitors of their respective houses, having no control whatever over the entertainments given on their stages, beyond, in the first instance, the selection of them. The authors who used to get, in these theatres, an occasional chance for the production of their plays, are now effectually barred out. The actors who were able to make homes for at least a season, are now perpetually traveling—a life that destroys comfort and imperils health and the sanctity of domestic relations. Instead of playing a great number of parts each year, thereby gaining the ease and experience which are absolutely necessary to good acting, the actor represents one character for an entire season, and probably plays it far worse at the end than at the beginning of his engagement. His performance becomes mechanical and perfunctory; his audiences are always changing, and he cares comparatively little what they think of him, for they may not meet again for a long time. When the actor was in the “stock” he was ever striving to become a local favorite, knowing that the doing so would insure his reengagement for another season, possibly in a more advanced position, or secure a transference to a theatre of higher standing. There is, undoubtedly, more raw talent to-day in the ranks of actors and actresses than ever before, but the practical impossibility of securing proper artistic training leaves it, for the most part, imperfectly developed. Then, too, the accidental “hits” made by a few stars of no decided ability leads many players to have no ambition beyond “getting a piece” and inflicting themselves on the public in what they too frequently vainly believe to be their specialties. The desire to be a good leading stock actor is far more commendable, and more truly artistic, than that to be a star playing one rôle continually. But as with managers, so with actors, the desire for money-getting overrides devotion to art, and the followers of this greatest, because most absolutely realizing—

fleeting though its form be—of all arts, come to regard it merely as a business.

(6.) How few managers of stock companies there are left, has been previously stated. With the exception of Mr. Daly, every one of them seems at times to be feeling his way and not to have a distinct policy. Each occasionally jumps from comedy to farce, from farce to melodrama, and from melodrama to domestic drama. Their companies are, naturally, not equally at home in all kinds of plays, and unsatisfactory performances often result from these violent alternations. The experience of older countries has shown the advisability of a manager restricting himself to one class of play. His company is then seen always at its best, for it is doing the work for which it is especially selected. His patrons, moreover, know what to expect, and learn to go to his theatre, without even particularly inquiring what the night's bill may be, for they are assured they will witness something good and of the kind they like. At one time Mr. Wallack had such a reputation for the presentation of high-class comedies of both the old and new schools; but his production of sensational melodramas, however remunerative temporarily, has, it is generally believed, driven away his old and, for a long time, faithful lovers of comedy.

The road-manager has very rarely been an actor. He is a business man, pure and simple, and is generally rather given to boast of the fact. He has no "weakness," as he would term it, for art; he is "in to make money," which he proceeds to do by beating down the salaries of actors till they reach such a low level that ambition is almost crushed. He makes his companies play nine, ten, and even, sometimes, twelve times a week, and is happiest when he reaches some Godless Western town where he can give two performances on Sunday. Whenever it is possible he makes an actor play two or three parts, and the best actor is very often to him the one who will accept the smallest salary. As for encouragement, sympathy, or consideration, an actor might quite as hopefully look to a calculating machine, and would, at least, have in that case an assurance that its figures were correct—a confidence he does not always feel when the manager exhibits a statement which shows the impossibility of paying salaries. These so-called managers are, moreover, constantly on the look-out for rich and ambitious amateurs, who, for the sake of exhibiting their supposed charms and gorgeous dresses, will forego the trifling consideration

of salary. It is these people who too frequently take the bread out of the mouths of the well-trained professional; and it is these people, with whom the stage is only a means of gratifying vanity, who are responsible for by far the larger share of the immorality so freely, and often so baselessly, charged against actresses.

(7.) When "Pinafore" overran this country like a virulent epidemic, amateurs and church-choir members by the hundreds became, in their own opinions, professional actors and actresses. A few weeks' work in the chorus sufficed to render them so dissatisfied with their old means of earning a livelihood that they have never returned to it. Posing as actors and actresses they have been engaged by indiscriminating or unscrupulous managers at salaries so low that many old-time actors, rather than compete with such incompetence and inexperience, have retired from the profession. The writer has repeatedly met girls, who, after one season in the chorus of comic opera, have sought positions as leading ladies in dramatic companies, and, what is worse, have sometimes obtained them. The inefficient actors and actresses, of whom the public so often complain, come most frequently from this class.

Whence is the amelioration of this unhappy condition of our stage coming, if coming at all? I sincerely believe the signs, though they are, perhaps, like the cloud, no larger than a man's hand, are still plainly to be seen. The most hopeful, perhaps, were the receptions accorded in New York last season to two plays, "The Jilt," by Dion Boucicault, and "Our Society," a version by Clinton Stuart of Pailleron's "*Le monde ou l'on s'ennuie*." "The Jilt" is a brilliantly written, but entirely unsensational, comedy of character, something in the vein of its distinguished author's first effort, "London Assurance." It was greeted most warmly by critics and public. "Our Society," a three-act comedy, is almost uneventful during the first two acts, and depends for its effect on clever contrast of types and brilliant dialogue. The third act has more dramatic action, but, even then, nothing of a stirring nature. Yet this play was a marked success of the season at the Madison Square Theatre.

In an article printed in the *Century* some months since, I quoted Théophile Gautier's *dictum*, that the stage always follows, and follows at a considerable interval, the taste in fictional litera-

ture. How strongly we are tending in our novels to the study and depiction of character, to the exclusion of mere sensational incident, must be evident to every one. The greetings given to the two comedies above instanced, prove that in New York, at least, there is a theatre-going public being gradually educated up to demand in plays the same qualities they admire in novels. And the taste that is first created in our intellectual centres will slowly, but surely, filter through the country. There will, of course, be always a demand for melodrama and farce, but that demand will decrease till it will be fully satisfied by the cheaper theatres, while the stages of the more expensive ones will be left for plays which possess accurate character-drawing and literary merit.

In a recently published article on Russian literature, Mr. Francisque Sarcey quotes M. Melchior de Vogues to this effect :

“ Romanticism was a bastard product. ‘It inspired the revolt. By a reaction against the classical heroes it sought from preference its characters in the social dregs. But, unwittingly, it was still penetrated with the classic spirit, for the monsters that it invented were still heroes among their class. Its courtesans, its convicts, its beggars, were more vain and boastful than the kings and queens of the old time. The bombastic theme had changed, but not the bombast. The public soon grew weary of romanticism. It demanded writers that would more faithfully represent life, that would depict society more in conformity with its actual manifestations. It sought in its literature the complexities of life, of beings, of ideas, and that element of relation which has been replaced in our time by the taste for the absolute.”

The public has grown weary of the romaniticism of the novel. It is already wearying fast of that of the stage. It is beginning to demand truth and naturalness, and of such kinds as it daily meets and knows. To render these attractive, the skill of the able writer must be added to that of the technical playwright. When this shall have been done a few times, and managers have found courage to present such work, we shall hear no more of the “ permanent divorce of literature from the stage.” The parting will prove to have been, happily, only a temporary separation. May it, like many other such separations, lead to a better understanding and appreciation of each by the other.

JULIAN MAGNUS.